

DUXBURY HISTORY FILE
REFERENCE

Revisiting Local Alden History by Bike

By Lesley Mahoney

Pilgrims John Alden and Priscilla Mullins Alden were among Duxbury's first white settlers, arriving in 1627. More than 350 years later, the mark they made on the town is faded but still very much in evidence.

Last Saturday, Alden descendant Bob Edmunds (just one of about five million Alden descendants, as he unassumingly noted) led a six-mile sunset bike tour through town, pointing out historic Alden points.

Four bikers departed from the John Alden House on Alden Street for the tour. Traveling down St. George Street to Washington Street, the group made its first stop right after the flag pole.

Edmunds pointed out a portion of the vast land included in the grant given to the Aldens by Governor Bradford. One hundred acres in all, the grant originally included the area now encompassed by the school complex, the town library and the Percy Walker Pool.

If one looks across the Bluefish River from the flag pole, there is a house visible between two juniper trees. Its last Alden resident, Lura Cushman, who died about eight years ago, gave the last 30 acres of the Alden land to the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, which will preserve the land as it is.

According to Edmunds, legend has it that Cushman changed her will when a nephew was spied surveying the property before she died, perhaps in anticipation of an inheritance.

In 1627, the Aldens, along with Capt. Myles Standish, were granted permission to reside in Duxbury in the summer on the condition that they would return to Plymouth for Sunday worship. Initially they did, but they became permanent settlers of the town in 1632.

After a look at the remaining Alden land (or what remains of the Alden land grant), Edmunds led the bikers along Washington Street to the Old Burying Grounds on Chestnut Street.

This spot, which houses the grave sites of John and Priscilla Alden, is unique because it is the "oldest continuously maintained cemetery in the United States."

The Alden stones now at the cemetery are not the original ones, but 1930 reproductions. The Alden Kindred continue to place flowers at the graves, along with clam shells.

Edmunds took this opportunity to enlighten the travelers about the courtship of John and Priscilla Alden. He explained that Capt. Myles Standish was first enamored of Priscilla Mullins.

As he stood at Standish's burial spot (which is bordered by cannons that, as far as Edmunds knows, are still owned by the Navy though they were originally loaned to the town on the condition that they would be returned if they were ever needed), Edmunds explained how

Standish asked John Alden to go to Mullins to ask for her hand in marriage on his behalf.

At that point, she delivered her famous line, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"

The rest is history: John and Priscilla wed. Edmunds said it is assumed, however, that the trio remained cordial, for one of the Aldens' daughters ultimately married Standish's son.

John Alden was the last surviving signer of

descendants. Today, the house is owned by The Alden Kindred of America.

Hagney narrated the tour through the dark, damp house, in which every piece is authentic Alden; nothing has been purchased by the Alden Kindred since it took over ownership of the house.

The oven, Hagney explained, is not much different from a contemporary oven. She said Priscilla Alden would most likely have four fires going at once, akin to today's four burners. In the back of the oven, there is a beehive oven for baking bread and custard.

The burning room was reserved for illness, childbirth or death. It is the place where John Alden himself reportedly drew his last breath.

The best room was the site for wakes and marriages. Alden's position as magistrate required him to marry people, as this was a civil, not religious, affair at the time.

Hagney pointed out the architecture of the best room. One wall bows out like a ship. She explained that this is evidence of Alden's skills as a cooper and furniture joiner. Combined with his boating experience, these skills resulted in a wall resembling the side of a boat, bowing out to encase one of the chimneys.

Upstairs, the tour continued through the family room, where the Alden family slept. They all slept in the same room to generate as much heat as possible. The 17th-century version of central heating was a square in the floor that could be removed to let in heat from the chimney.

Hagney illustrated a 17th-century version of a living will while showing the children's room. Apparently, Abigail Alden was left a widow and went back to live with her parents. She resided in this room and was given a deed to the house to safeguard her right to remain there.

Hagney continued the tour back downstairs, where she said the closet was an "obvious sign of wealth" since citizens were taxed on every room.

The great room was where, Hagney said, "anything of consequence happened," including parties and receptions. The ceiling is made from a paste of clam and oyster shells, oren hair and water. Apparently, the concoction worked, given its 400-year lasting power.

That concluded the house and bike tour, bringing the weary travelers back into the 20th century.



In search of Alden history: Cyclists and tour-goers Warren Clayman, center, and Diane Wells, right, come up alongside Sara Fargo and her horse, George, on Washington Street.

Staff Photo by Chris Bernatch

the Mayflower Compact. A cooper, or barrel-maker, he eventually took on the posts of lieutenant governor, deputy governor, Plymouth Bay Colony magistrate and representative to the Massachusetts General Court.

The tour commemorating these famous Pilgrims and their legacy continued back to the school complex, site of the "1627 cellar hole." Edmunds led the cyclists across the baseball fields to a roped-off depression, where the cellar of the first Alden home once was.

Legend has it that the current Alden home, built in 1653 by Alden and his sons, incorporates the original 1627 frame.

In 1960, under the direction of Roland Wells Robbins, a team set out to track down the original location of the house. Russell Edwards, a custodian with the Duxbury schools at the time, predicted the foundation would measure 16-and-a-half by 32 feet. Edmunds said the man had always suspected that the original house had been moved. Sure enough, those measurements (the same as those of the current house's kitchen, burning room and pantry) were on target.

The four-part biking expedition ended where it had begun — back at the Alden House for a guided tour by its director, Ellen Hagney. From 1653 to the early 1900s, the Aldens' second house was home to Alden